
Government of the District of Columbia



Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

Testimony of

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Director

Public Oversight Roundtable

OFFICE OF THE TENANT ADVOCATE (OTA)

Committee on the Consumer and Regulatory Affairs
Honorable Jim Graham, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

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Room 500
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
10:00 a.m.

Good morning Council Member Graham and members of the Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. I am Patrick Canavan, Director of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. I am here this morning to present testimony on the status of the establishment of the Office of the Chief Tenant Advocate.

Under the Fiscal Year 2006 Budget Support Act of 2005 the Committee recommended, the Council approved and the Mayor signed the formation of the Office of the Chief Tenant Advocate (OTA). Johanna Shreve has served as the Acting Chief Tenant Advocate since mid-April 2006 and spent her first 50 plus days moving aggressively to set up, organize and staff the OTA and establishing relationships in the tenant community.

First, Ms. Shreve has participated in all DCRA executive and senior level meetings to gain a comprehensive understanding of the internal workings at DCRA. Second, she has reviewed over sixty applications, interviewed over twenty candidates and has identified a number of strong candidates for all the vacant positions. She anticipates being able to bring the first two on board within the next two weeks.

I'm pleased to report that the OTA has established excellent working relationships with several DCRA divisions including the Office of the Rent Administrator, the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, and the General Counsel. Through these cooperative relationships, we've put several initiatives into place:

- The OTA now receives a weekly listing of all requests for condominium conversion and/or building sales. They share the lists with non-profit housing providers so that they can assist tenants directly and timely in organizing and understanding their legal rights.
- The Rental Accommodations and Conversion Division (RACD) does not currently track requests for rent increases and tenant petition filings. With the advent of changes in the Rent Control statutes, there has been an increase in the number of calls made to the OTA's office regarding this issue. In cooperation with the Office of the Rent Administrator, the OTA is beginning to track the number of requests for rent increases and the number of tenant petitions filed each year to determine patterns of activity.
- Working with DCRA's General Counsel, the OTA has developed a legal services provider program that it anticipates will allow them to contract with up to six (6) legal service providers within the next few weeks. Through this program, the OTA looks forward to having contract vehicles in place so that

they can retain both general and specialized legal providers for cases involving tenant–landlord disputes and tenant association issues.

As Acting Chief Tenant Advocate, Ms Shreve has placed a priority on attending tenant advocate organizational meetings throughout the city’s wards. The issues raised during these meetings all have a common thread – sales and building conversions, rent increases, and the recognition of the phenomenon of “hoarding” by elderly tenants. The OTA has listened, and responded. They’ve already begun working with the AARP Legal Clinic for the Elderly to establish a cooperative process among tenants, housing providers and the courts with the objective of maintaining affordable housing for vulnerable, elderly tenants and reducing the number of evictions.

The OTA has established regular monthly meetings with both tenant advocates and the non- profit legal community to hear and listen to their concerns. As a result of discussions at one of the first of these meetings, the Acting Chief Tenant Advocate became involved in the aggressive organization of tenants at the Woodner Apartment complex.

Working with your staff, Chairman Graham, and the Ward 1 Core Team, the OTA marshaled the forces of the DC government at this property. As a result of their aggressive and cooperative efforts, the Woodner Apartment complex now has a tenant association that has begun to address the various management issues facing the renters. On May 10, the Core Team, including representatives from FEMS, MPD, DPW, DMH, DOH, and DCRA walked with the Woodner management and inspected various components of the property. DCRA's housing inspection team has completed a building-wide inspection of all accessible units. The Chief Tenant Advocate's job to work with the tenants to sustain themselves continues.

Additionally, the OTA developed an outreach program specifically for the Spanish-speaking community. Working with the MPD Latino Liaison Unit, they have outlined a three-pronged approach that includes radio, newspaper and television outreach programs. They'll present the details of the overall program to the Latino Commission during their next regularly scheduled meeting with DCRA.

The OTA put plans in place to revive and re-publish in both English and Spanish the Tenant Survival Guide, created by and formerly published by the Harrison Institute for Public Law at the Georgetown University Law Center. They'll work with the Harrison Institute to update this valuable document, create several

additional publications, and develop multi-media products for tenant organizations and others to use as they seek to raise the level of awareness of tenant rights issues.

The OTA is also charged with the responsibility of staffing the recently created Condominium Sales and Conversion Task Force. Their role is to provide administrative support, listen and offer constructive input as the members of the task force deliberate on how to improve the current statutory language and regulatory guidance on building “sales”. As Acting Chief Tenant Advocate, Ms. Shreve makes certain that tenant interests are not only represented, but are front and center as we review the provisions of the law and the code.

I don’t want to minimize the time the OTA spends working with individual tenants. In addition to the activities I’ve already described, the Acting Chief Tenant Advocate spends a good part of each day answering questions from tenants about their rights or assisting them in the completion of tenant petitions. The OTA currently has 63 plus active cases. The issues range from discrimination to allegations of illegal sales and/or condominium conversions.

Planning is underway for several workshops within the next ninety days that will focus on tenant’s rights. The OTA is working with a number of community-based

organizations to provide important material and valuable information about the laws and rules that govern rental housing with an emphasis on tenant rights and the petition process.

The OTA's future may well be defined by recently introduced legislation that intends to make the office an independent agency. The Acting Chief Tenant Advocate looks forward to working on the transition, design and planning of this facet of the office's evolution. And as additional legislation is enacted, such as the pending The "Office of Tenant Advocate Clarification Act of 2006," (Bill 16-791), they'll make corresponding adjustments in the OTA's operations.

I want to conclude my testimony today by alerting the District's renters that the OTA has a new, direct phone line and that they can contact the Chief Tenant Advocate by calling **202-442-8359**. The Office of the Chief Tenant Advocate is here to serve them – the District's renters – and only them – and it's important for them to know how to reach the OTA directly. They can also email the OTA with issues or concerns or for advice and assistance at OTA@dc.gov.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide this report today. I am available to answer any questions you may have.